



 **Hossein Mohseni**

Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran

Abjection of the Other in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*: The Subject's Deterrence Strategy for Becoming the Abject

ABSTRACT

Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) is about the volatile relationship between Robert Neville—the sole survivor of the human race—and vampires as the members of a brave new world order. While many critics tend to read the relationship between Robert and the vampires as the colonizer and the colonized, this article sees the need to devise a paradigm to acknowledge the critical merits of all these postcolonial and racial readings without overemphasizing the validity of any of the mentioned readings at the expense of the other. The paradigm shows the journey of a subject who initially thought that he is in absolute control, but later is made to realize that, in his insistence on this position, he is actually being swayed towards marginalization and abjection. At the same time, the initially abject and marginalized vampires assume the position of dominance and normalcy at the end of the novel. In order to reach this understanding, the study draws on Julia Kristeva's theoretical conceptualization of abjection.

Keywords: legend, Matheson, vampires, Kristeva, abject.

INTRODUCTION

Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) portrays a unique relationship between the protagonist Robert Neville and vampires in a post-apocalyptic world. In this world, the spread of a bacterial pandemic has turned almost the entire population into vampires or caused their deaths.

In the midst of this disease-stricken world, Robert is the sole survivor of the human race. Although he initially thinks of himself as a representative of the human race and normalcy, he later realizes that it is he—and the race which he represents—that is the anomaly in a world in which a mutated kind of vampirism¹ is going to be the new normal. Ultimately, it is he who will be regarded as the monstrous anomaly of whom every sentient vampire should be afraid. This realization shows the journey of a subject who initially thought that he was in absolute control, but later is made to realize that in his insistence on this position, he is truly being swayed towards marginalization and abjection. At the same time, the initially abject and marginalized vampires assume the position of dominance and normalcy at the end of the novel.

Considering this interesting and full circle relationship between Robert's seemingly autonomous subject position and the vampires' abjection, many critics tended to read the text in the light of postcolonial and racial critical perspectives. Nicola Bowring (2015) and Kathy Patterson (2005) are the authors of two of the prominent studies with purely colonial and racial emphasis on the relationship between Neville as the symbolic representative of European white colonizers and the vampires as the representatives of people of color and colonized beings in general. This perspective is also present in Amy J. Ransom's book (2018). Even in Louise Nuttall's text (2015), which discusses the aspects of focalization in the novel's third person narratological perspective, the narratological technique is justified on the basis of Robert's central and colonial subject position; the kind of Orientalist position which is also mentioned in Bowring's article.

Alongside such racial and postcolonial readings are valid class-based interpretations of the text as well. In critical readings such as Simchi Cohen's (2014), the author plays with class-based interpretations of the differences between more advanced and human-like vampires and the zombie-like vampires, and how both of these groups have little to do with

¹ Roughly speaking, one could divide the kinds of vampires in this novel into two groups: One group has a baser, more beast-like and more zombie-like features; the other is more advanced, mutated into having sentience, and possesses more human-like characteristics. In the present study, we would be referring to these two groups through using zombie-like and human-like vampires.

the aristocratic and Gothic solitude of the figure of Stoker's *Dracula* as the forefather novel of vampirism. This reading is coupled with some critical observations pertaining to class divisions in Ransom's book (2018). Ransom believes that while regarding Neville and the vampires as respective representatives of aristocracy and bourgeoisie (or vice-versa) cannot be fully supported—especially due to Neville's working class history and background—such an interpretation may have merits, especially after reviewing the class-based concerns in the formation of Stoker's *Dracula* as the literary origin of vampirism in literature.

Apart from the two interpretive readings mentioned earlier, critics such as Laura Diehl (2013) represent many other commentators who acknowledge the depiction of the militarized anxieties of a nation regarding the repercussions of a nuclear holocaust; a holocaust which they consider to be one of the possible outcomes of the Cold War. In this sense, worldwide death and people's mutation into vampires in the novel can be read as having symbolic significance regarding such an anxiety.

I see the merits in the mentioned critical readings and will utilize points from these insightful interpretations wherever necessary. What this article seeks to contribute relates to the presentation of a paradigm in which the dynamic relationship between the subject in control (initially Neville, and then the vampires) and the marginalized figures (the vampires at first, and then Neville) can be analyzed. Such a paradigm does not emphasize the validity of any of the mentioned studies above or at the expense of the other. In this sense, the analysis offered here will not be limited to one fixed kind of critical rendition, whether racial and colonial interpretations or class-based and militarized readings.

The study turns to Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject/abjection to first recognize the conventionality of the subject positions of Neville and the vampires as the respective representatives of the subject and the abject, and then to analyze the semiotically dynamic and slippery nature of each of these positions.² It follows its reading of the dynamism between the subject and the abject in four parts. First, Neville's phobia of the unknown nature of the vampires and this brave new post-apocalyptic world will be recognized as the subject's initial impetus to define his position through abjecting the unknown. The article then turns to Robert's miscalculations and misrecognitions about his position in relation to the vampires and the

² This reading will be different from Chris Koenig-Woodyard (2018). His rhizomatic interpretation concerning Neville's subject position is thought provoking, but it does not manage to show the process in which both Neville and the vampires experience their conventional positions in the symbolic order of language first, and then realize the uncontainable semiotic aspects—which are truly disruptive and in a sense rhizomatic—of their subject positions.

overall post-apocalyptic landscape. In the third part, the essay discusses the disruption of this convenient dichotomy between the respective subject positions of Robert and the vampires. This disruption brings us to Robert's own abjection as the new anomaly in the novel's post-apocalyptic world. In this final part, the essay observes how Robert remains in the always-shifting play of subject and object positions by accepting his new object role.

As mentioned earlier, the study's overarching Kristevan paradigm includes the pertinent merits of all the valid critical readings—racial, postcolonial, class-based, and militaristic—and at the same time, does not give precedence to any of them.

PHOBIA OF THE SEEMINGLY UNKNOWN: THE FIRST DRIVE BEHIND SUBJECT/OBJECT FORMATION

In Matheson's novel, Robert Neville initially regards himself as the protector of the human race against vampiric contamination. As Diehl puts it, Robert, being "repulsed by the threat of vampiric penetration and its miscegenate implications, wages biological warfare against them" (104). He also looks for ways to "contain both the physical and symbolic threats" of the seemingly abnormal and the infectious against the normality of the past (Cohen 54). In this sense, Neville sees the vampires' literal infectiousness and their symbolic abnormality as the twofold justification for exterminating them. In his eyes, they are the entities that cause the highest degree of physical and symbolic phobia in him, and therefore, they need to be objectified. Defined literally, "abjection is the act of throwing away" (McCabe and Holmes 77). However, Kristeva's conceptualization of abjection and object moments in identity formation refers to "an unconscious defense mechanism used to protect the self against threats" (McCabe and Holmes 77). For Robert, the vampires are precisely such "threats." They "incite abjection [in him since they can] disturb identity, system, and order. [They] do not respect borders, positions, and rules" (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 4).

In the novel, Robert's phobia of the object is expressed in the plot as well as the narrative structure and language. When it comes to the plot, from the very beginning of the novel readers find Robert protecting his renditions of "order and the system" (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 4). He contains the vampires who have no regard for his demarcated "borders and rules" (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 4). Using Foucauldian terminology, Cohen sees Robert's efforts to contain the contagious vampires of

the novel as the signs of “the ensuing inspection, partition, quarantine, purification, and, above all, order that arises the modern act of discipline, which derives from *the fear* of the uncontained” (50, emphasis mine). This act of ordering and disciplining should not be regarded solely as the phobia experienced by a member of a so-called superior race or class against the abject; rather, it also reflects Robert’s procrastination regarding the ultimate acknowledgement of his identity’s hollowness and alienation in a world filled with vampires.

Apart from the plot, narrative techniques reflect Robert’s abhorrence of the vampires. He abhors the vampires’ presence so much because he regards them as unspecified and unknown entities. This attitude is materialized through the focalization of the text from Robert’s perspective. Due to focalization, “a lack of specificity can be seen in the vampires’ overall construal” (Nuttal 29). Nuttal believes that in the novel, the vampires are first referred to as “they,” which, lacking an antecedent, cues an indistinct, undetailed conceptualization of these characters in readers. This tendency gradually changes as the chapter progresses and expressions such as “filthy bastards” (Matheson 11), “the women” (12), “men” (16) are used, before “they” are finally described as “vampires” in chapter two (21). Before chapter two, Neville always refers to them impersonally as “they” (13, 17, 65); “them” (14, 19, 26), even as “that” (29), or as “bastards” (17, 20, 30). According to Amy J. Ransom, Robert’s “former neighbor has become completely alien to him now. Compared to dogs and wolves, they are subhuman animals” (30). Using Harrington’s insight, one could deduce that in his emphasis on not even naming vampires, Neville is showcasing how the subject who is seemingly in control “becomes the object of the abject vampires himself” (Harrington 146). Using Kristeva’s formulations on abjection, Harrington postulates that

the object of this phobia is such that it cannot be spoken of as what it is—the most near—the self. It can be spoken only in a kind of ceaseless wordplay that does not mention *fear*, because recognizing the thing one is afraid of would call into being the very loss that is repressed. (146, emphasis mine)

Robert refrains from allowing the vampires to enter the symbolic structure of language by not naming them directly. Such verbal obfuscation perpetuates the dominance of phobia: the concept which he unconsciously thinks would protect him from truly facing the void and emptiness all around him. Like other hegemonic subjects in a colonizing context—whose subject positions are always under the threat of utter destruction by the other—Robert utilizes linguistic ambiguity as a form of survival

strategy; therefore, these vague wordplays and instances of vague pronoun-referencing should be regarded as Neville's survival strategy.

If one reads Robert's language—his reluctance to name the vampires, and even after naming them, referring to them as a homogeneously abject entity—as a sign of his phobia of the vampires' ambivalent position between life and death and his fear of total annihilation and death, one can see how, as noted by Kristeva,

[f]ear having been bracketed [will make] discourse seem tenable only if it ceaselessly confronts that otherness of both the repellent and repelled nature of the abject. The fundamental *fear*, the dissolving of the subject in the face of arbitrary signification, is, once glossed by the play of fears, lost to memory. The founding denial contained in the metaphor of want glosses that void of being, of meaning, that is death. (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 6, emphasis mine)

Robert's procrastination regarding naming the vampires reflects his "fundamental fear [of] dissolving in the face of arbitrary signification" of language (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 6). In this sense, it is either him who needs to be remembered vaguely and abjectly or the vampires. Although he may not regard this fight in the symbolic manner that this study does, he is subconsciously aware that by losing to the vampires in both the physical and symbolic acts of containment, he may as well embrace his own "void of being" (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 6) and accepts his total annihilation both in the physical and symbolic worlds of language and signification. Robert's wordplay and vague pronoun-referencing is his way of "playing" the fears which he has—treating them in a ludic, unserious manner—and, in Kristeva's terms, his desperate attempt to lose this fear to memory. Like any incumbent of the dominant subject position, abject procrastination and oblivion constitute the phobic strategies for glossing over true recognition of the other.

By emphasizing the necessity of containing and controlling his perimeter and its order from the very beginning and creating such a delay in naming the vampires, Robert—as the novel's only focalization point—"reduces the vampires in toto, to carriers of a disease poised to eradicate the last remaining bastion of civilization" (Diehl 104). This reductionist attitude towards the vampires shows his phobic failure in "spit[ting] out, reject[ing], [and] almost violently exclud[ing]" the vampires (McAfee 46). This failure is due to the impossibility to contain—either in actuality or in words—the threatening nature of a species which is "not quite living and not quite dead" (Cohen 52). The living dead defy categorization, slipping over the edges, borders and boundaries designed precisely to contain

fears and monsters. By delaying their naming, Robert hopes that in the continuance of his journey in the novel's post-apocalyptic world, he can manage to find a successful strategy for the vampires' annihilation.

As mentioned earlier, Robert's radical emphasis on the vampires' exclusion in actuality and in language's symbolic structures is due to the simultaneity of the vampires' uncanny familiarly and unfamiliarity (being human-like, and at the same time being zombie-like figures), necessitating their abjection. According to Kristeva, abjection is the most radical modality of exclusion. Utilizing McAfee's interpretation, one could see that according to Kristeva,

[w]hat is abjected is radically excluded but never banished altogether. It hovers at the periphery of one's existence, constantly challenging one's own tenuous borders of selfhood. What makes something abject and not simply repressed is that it does not entirely disappear from consciousness. It remains as both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one's own clean and proper self. The abject is what does not respect boundaries. It beseeches and pulverizes the subject. (McAfee 46)

Robert's unconscious procrastination regarding the very use of the word vampires indicates the profundity of his phobia of this newly emerged species in the post-apocalyptic world. Unconsciously, he is aware of the fact that his efforts to contain them in language or not to speak of them will not result in their repression, and can only help him to assume his subject position of normalcy quite contingently and in a tenuous manner.

Robert, incapable of containing the vampires, starts to experience phobia on another level. The phobia—which can be translated as a kind of tragedy, according to Cohen—is described as follows: “To die, he thought, never knowing the fierce joy and attendant comfort of a loved one's embrace. To sink into that hideous coma, to sink then into death and perhaps, to return to sterile, awful wanderings. All without knowing what it was to love and be loved” (Matheson 64). According to Cohen, tragedy here is a

notion inextricably linked to love: a love not defined by a past set of norms or by a man and a woman or a man and a fantasy or a man and a companion; a love not colored by a domesticity couched in a costume of sheer masculinity; a love that might entail touching or perhaps even embracing the realm of the perceived abnormal, the realm of the vampire. (54)

Like any other incumbent of the seemingly autonomous subject position Robert is unconsciously incapable of categorically excluding what he finds to be radically abhorrent since they (here vampires) have strong

resemblances (look like humans) and at the same time differences (zombie-like attitudes) compared to his own human-like characteristics. Yet he cannot yearn—at least on an unconscious level—for their complete annihilation since, without their presence, he does not know how to justify the phobic nature of his own lonely existence. Robert needs something to identify against; how can one define oneself other than in opposition to the otherized abject? Robert is aware that he needs the vampires to be able to see himself as a human. He knows that, without them, he turns into what Kristeva calls a “straying” entity: “The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing” (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 8). Knowing that without the vampires’ presence, he cannot justify his phobia and consequently his normalcy, Robert symbolically shows his attachment to the very thing that he abhors so much when he talks about love.

Phobia is the drive that keeps Robert in a contingently-formed subject position. As with most kinds of phobia, the phobic subject starts to have quite a paradoxical regard towards his abject object of fear. Using McAfee’s interpretation, one could uphold the Kristevan claim that the subject (here Robert) always “finds the abject both repellant and seductive and thus his or her borders of self are, paradoxically, continuously threatened and maintained. They are threatened because the abject is alluring enough to destroy the borders of self; they are maintained because the fear of such a collapse keeps the subject vigilant” (McAfee 49–50). As argued above, for Robert, the vampires are simultaneously repellant and seductive for two reasons: they look like cadavers, but even in their zombie-like state, they have a strong resemblance to him as the sole survivor of humanity. This paradoxical status of the vampires seriously challenges or even “crumbles the borders” (McAfee 49) which he desires to create for himself physically and symbolically in language. The other reason refers to the dependence of his phobia on the vampires’ existence. Although knowing that like any object of phobia, the vampires will “hover upon [his] identity’s periphery” (McAfee 46), and even on occasions encourage him to yearn for a horrendous union with them, he also knows that they are necessary for his oppositional identification against something abject and categorically otherized.

Robert’s misrecognition and miscalculations are the second means through which he desperately tries to hold on to his exclusivist and reductionist attitudes towards the vampires as abject entities. Like his phobic endeavors to contain them both in the real world and in the symbolic structures of language, these misrecognitions try to preserve his seemingly autonomous subject position. This drive will be discussed in the next section of the article.

MISRECOGNITION AND MISCALCULATION: THE PERPETUATING DRIVE BEHIND SUBJECT/ OBJECT FORMATION

470

In the novel, Robert persists in his phobic containment strategies by administering them routinely, and also by pretending to have a naturalistic and disinterested attitude towards the vampires. Neville embraces “the monotony of his daily tasks: the carrying away of bodies, the repairing of the house’s exterior, the hanging of garlic” (Matheson 50) so that he can perpetuate the phobic containment strategies with which he has managed to hold on to his tenuously formed subject position. As Cohen notes, “lists, partitions, and maps help Robert sort morning from evening, daylight from nighttime, breakfast from dinner, vampire from human” (56). This detailed outlining of his domestic routine—what Adryan Glasgow refers to as “vampire maintenance—and the insistence on a ritualized structuring of the daylight hours recur as consistent leitmotif in the novel” (Ransom 22). Ransom believes that Robert’s routinized containment strategies also help him keep at bay the deep sense of alienation, both spiritual and physical, that he experiences (22).

Robert’s routinization of containment and home safeguarding strategies should not be taken as a sign of the utter freedom of a colonizer or a member of a so-called superior race who is absolutely in command, but rather as the desperation of the incumbent of such a position to remain sane and preserve the phobic core of his identity. As Ransom believes, Robert’s commitment to routinized activities should not be read as the symbolic representation of “salvation from all responsibilities” (47).³ He needs to justify the monotony in accordance with preserving a greater good: namely, the preservation of his sanity and subject position as the sole survivor of civilization. At first, he finds “monotony to be the great obstacle,” but later “he learn[s] to accept the dungeon he existed in, neither seeking to escape with sudden derring-do nor beating his pate bloody on its walls” (Matheson 111).

Robert’s acceptance of the monotony of his fixed position in his house and all of his daily containment strategies make him adhere to a particular kind of obstinate fixity. In the uncertain landscape of a post-apocalyptic world, this adherence results in one of his first miscalculations. Even when Ruth—one of the vampires in the story—warns him of danger well in advance, he refuses to leave his containment habits and house, stating, “I . . . couldn’t . . . I almost went several times. Once I even packed

³ For more references to the superficially optimistic readings from Robert’s lonely rummaging in Los Angeles’ derelict post-apocalyptic landscape, see Ransom (47).

and . . . started out. But I couldn't, I couldn't . . . go. I was too used to the . . . the house. It was a habit, just . . . just like the habit of living. I got . . . used to it" (Matheson 165). As Kathy Davis Patterson puts it, "in this unstable post-apocalyptic landscape, it is Neville who has become stagnant, 'passé,' a persistent stereotype" (26). One can read Robert's miscalculation in perpetuating his obstinacy and fixity through Kristeva's conceptualizations of abjection. She believes that the subject's "fearful feeling of lack and loss does not necessarily result in the abject nature of the subject's development. It results in misrecognition" (Harrington 145). Robert's adherence to the monotony is his misrecognized strategy to deal with his shaky dominant subject position in the novel's post-apocalyptic world; the strategy which would not result in his ultimate survival and perpetuation in this world.

Trying to study and treat the vampires as a naturalist scientist/hunter/observer is another misrecognition with which Robert desperately tries to perpetuate the façade of being in control. Robert's use of vague pronouns such as "they" in order to defer the very act of naming the vampires has already been discussed. Apart from this symbolic strategy in language, describing them as "crouching on their haunches like dogs, eyes glittering at the house, teeth slowly grating together; back and forth, back and forth" (Matheson 22), or presenting readers with the menacing image that "outside they howled and pummeled the door, shouting his name in a paroxysm of demented fury" (Matheson 46), give him the authority to treat them with the kind of naturalist violence that hunters and scientists treat their preys and laboratory subjects later in the novel. He views them as having no human social interaction—or, in Ransom's words, as "subhuman animals" (30). That is why in one section of the novel, the narrator, focalized through Robert's perspective, describes them as follows:

He turned on the water there and went back in. When he reached the peephole, he saw another man and a woman on the lawn. None of the three was speaking to either of the others. They never did. They walked and walked about on restless feet, circling each other like wolves, never looking at each other once, having hungry eyes only for the house and their prey inside the house. (Matheson 65)

Ironically, he considers himself to be the prey of these animalistic creatures, or these ambulatory "corpses" (Matheson 65). As such, he feels justified in killing as many of them as possible, like a hunter. He believes that "[i]f I didn't kill them, sooner or later they'd come after me. I have no choice; no choice at all" (Matheson 146). As Bowring also attests, "Robert ultimately defends his destruction of the vampires as justified, and we are encouraged

toward seeing them as monsters, inhuman, partly through animalistic comparisons—as an example: both women were the color of fish out of water (Matheson 8)—as well as Neville’s experiments on them as subjects” (Bowring 133). It is interesting how he also gives a moralistic twist to his containment strategies by conveniently refusing to discern between the two groups of vampires out there. For him, their holistic containment under a singular abject category is the ideal choice with which he can thwart the realization that it is he who is the abnormal one in this vampiric world.

Morally justifying his violence against these homogenized animals takes a scientific turn as well. In this excerpt from the novel, Nuttall believes “attentional focusing of body parts and the reduced mind attribution it invites for both Neville and the vampires” show Neville to be an experimental scientist who takes no pleasure in examining the body of a female vampire (32):

472

Her hands closed over his wrists and her body began to twist and flop on the rug. Her eyes were still closed, but she gasped and muttered and her body kept trying to writhe out of his grip. Her dark nails dug into his flesh . . . Usually he felt a twinge of guilt when he realized that, but for some affliction he didn’t understand these people were the same as he. But now an experimental fervor had seized him and he could think of nothing else. (Matheson 34)

Here, through “metonymic references” to his body parts and to the vampires’ body parts (Nuttall 32), and through the emphasis that he is taking no pleasure in doing such things, he is acquitted of having any moral responsibilities. In the case of the female vampires, “readers’ sense of these characters’ ability to experience emotions and pain and thus hold rights as moral patients is also likely to be less prominent” (Nuttall 32). By refusing to acknowledge his strong desire to embrace—even sexually—the vampires as the abject figures of his world, and in his insistence to regard them as expendable abject figures, “all [that] is most near [to him] is rejected in the subject’s misrecognition, and a territory is created edged by the abject” (Harrington 146). Robert needs to reject this homogenously-formed group of vampires as the only thing that is “most near” to him so that he can implement his containing strategies successfully. By doing this, he can manage—at least transiently and contingently—to preserve a slippery territory for him at the edge of this dejected/abject group of vampires. In the novel, this territory is symbolized through Robert’s efforts to protect his home and to preserve his sole right to name these creatures, and consequently control the discourse. In these acts of dominance and preservation, one should not see Robert solely as a colonizing figure, or

as a member of so-called superior race or class, but rather as a desperate subject who wishes to perpetuate his survival in a world where most of the symbolic means of handling the other have failed to contain this world's semiotic and uncontainable abject elements.

Robert sticks to his routine containment strategies and his fixed physical locality even in the face of total annihilation since he fails to genuinely acknowledge his absolute alienation. He cannot commit himself to an accurate recognition of his surroundings, and only upholds a series of hollow and meaningless containment strategies. He needs to find a grander, more honorable justification for these strategies, since, as Kristeva believes, "if [the subject's] identification of desire with external objects fails, the subject turns inward and, in the act of discovering the impossible within would result in failure to recognize his kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 5). Robert knows that survival is the only way to suppress the awareness of the lack of anything familiar or homely around him: the fact that will sully even his "memory" of a normal past, and that will inevitably make him realize that it is he who is the representative of the new abnormalcy in a world whose new normal is the initially-abject vampires.

Robert's ultimate viability to find anything meaningful within himself and beyond the phobic strategies of containment brings us to the semiotic return (or as Kristeva believes its eruption) of the abject vampires in the signifying structure of the novel.

THE SEMIOTIC ERUPTION OF THE ABJECT: THE DISRUPTION IN DRIVES BEHIND SUBJECT/ ABJECT FORMATION

The ultimate failure of Robert's containment strategies—which consist of militaristic, symbolic and naturalistic strategies—bespeaks the semiotic nature of some aspects of his subject position and that of the vampires. In the novel, Robert's violence against the vampires, and his inability to see the liminality of his subject position and that of the vampires, are rife with semiotic elements. Due to these elements, their lives—especially Robert's life—would be under the threat of "infection of death" (McAfee 46). In order to suppress and contain this infection, Robert tries to contain any sign of death around him (later the vampires do the same against Robert). However, as discussed earlier, what he manages to do is to commit himself to a number of failing containment strategies regarding his own status and the status of the vampires. In this commitment, he exposes more than ever his violence and the liminality of his subject position and that of the vampires: the sense

of liminality he has wanted to repress both literally in the actual world and metaphorically in the symbolic world of language. In the novel, Ruth, as one of vampires under attack, bolts when she sees the seemingly monstrous Neville rushing toward her. At first, he does not “realize how frightening he looked; six foot three in his boots, a gigantic bearded man with an intent look” (Matheson 112). He chases, catches up with, and, in time, gains the woman’s weary trust, even though he speaks with “the harsh, sterile voice of a man who had lost all touch with humanity” (Matheson 113). Koenig-Woodyard believes that if one considers the vampires’ potential for violence as an excuse for their abjection (both in the actual world and in language) by Robert, one can also say that “Neville slays numerous vampires, and in the mathematics of rhizomatic monstrosity in the novel, he is as lethal a Gothic killer of the vampires as they are of humans” (83).

After his first meaningful encounter with one of the more human-like vampires, and his observation of her recoil at his formidable appearance, he starts to accept his monstrosity, which he had found irrepresentable at the beginning. Until this point, he has tried to stick to his dichotomizing schemes of the subject and the object, but now, seeing that all those schemes cannot fully contain his own monstrosity, he acknowledges that “the vampirically fuelled biological regression of the earth now includes him despite having arduously evaded the vampires for nine months” (Koenig-Woodyard 85). That is why he says, “I’m an animal! . . . I’m a dumb, stupid animal” (Matheson 81). Neville is bestial because his unique zoological status shapes an existence that revolves around the corporeal and instinctual rather than the emotional and social interactions and pleasures of the dead world of the past that he once shared with other humans. In another section of the novel, Robert’s compassionless attitude is also represented to us. Having survived yet another onslaught, Robert sprawls exhausted on the floor and “sat wondering why he didn’t feel more compassion for her [Ruth]” (Matheson 131). It is compassion that should really set him apart from the vampires. Like the vampires’ macabre state, the narrator of the novel informs us that Robert’s status is infected and macabre too. Regarding Robert’s macabre status, the narrator notes that “emotion [would be] a difficult thing to summon from the dead” (Matheson 131). Robert’s inability to express any emotion, coupled with Ruth’s fearful mirroring of Robert’s violence and monstrosity, shows that Matheson “monstrifies the vampire slayer who becomes a sort of monstrous hybrid, a chimera whose monstrousness derived precisely from the multiplicity of animals that comprise it” (Koenig-Woodyard 86). On the one hand, Robert sees his violence and emotionless response towards the vampires as justified—a part of his survival strategy—but on the other hand, readers manage to learn through Ruth’s perspective of “his erratic, scientific, militarized, emotional,

and psychological ambivalence" towards his own violence (Koenig-Woodyard 87). The presence of such valid but contradictory interpretations of Robert's abject-making violence against the vampires "attests to the crisis of social structures, and the ideological and coercive manifestations" of the dead world of his past (Kristeva, "Revolution" 452), and turns his violence into a semiotic element of signification which cannot be contained within his militaristic, symbolic or naturalistic orders. It is at such moments that Neville starts flirting with suicidal ideation directly and wonders in one of his internal monologues: "Why not go out? It was a sure way to be free of them. Be one of them" (Matheson 18). "To escape the threat of the abject, he could willingly let go of the 'self' and the symbolic order" (Morelock 72). Neville's daydreaming when he starts letting go of his selfhood and decides to practice abjection in order to survive will be explored more deeply in the last section of the article.

His horror at his own violence is depicted as being at its highest when he sees the new order of the vampires killing other vampires as violently and cruelly as he did at the beginning of the novel. Bringing Christopher Brooks's insight into play, Amy J. Ransom believes that by witnessing this horrendous episode, Robert realizes his "inhuman isolation" is just "a state ironically self-justified as the will to survival for the human race, of which he believes himself to be the last remaining individual" (37). Realizing this bitter irony, Robert "comes to view himself as anything but a hero while seeing his own violent past being played out before him, watching as the skillful killers of the new society of the vampires execute the remaining old vampires" (Ransom 37). The encounter is one of the eruptive points of suppressed semiotic into Robert's shakily constructed symbolic order of containment and signification.

Apart from his violence, Robert's initial attempts to understand vampirism scientifically hinder him from understanding the vampires' liminality between life and death, and ultimately his own liminality between the dead world of the past and the present. As Morelock comments, "Ruth is abject, threatening borders twice over: First, she has the virus, which means technically she is a vampire, and vampirism transcends the border between life and death. Second, through medication she transcends the border between healthy and infected" (73). When Robert is faced with this fact he feels "as if all the security of reason were ebbing away from him. The framework of his life was collapsing and it frightened him" (Matheson 145). This in turn results in the bleeding of the eruptive semiotic into the normalizing symbolic.

However, Neville does not easily eschew his rationalistic and scientific endeavors and beliefs. He attempts further scientific mastery over superstition in solving the mystery of vampirism. He says: "There, on the slide, was the cause of the vampire. All the centuries of fearful superstition

had been felled in the moment he had seen the germ” (Matheson 80). Yet the power of superstition and legend will assert itself again by the end of the novel through Neville himself, in his role as monster, and “this anxiety about the ability of science to completely solve the mysteries of superstition pervades throughout the novel” (Bowring 136). This is due to the uncontainable nature of vampirism—whether one regards it as superstition, the stuff of legend, or as an utterly monstrous concept—through symbolic means of significance of science. Vampirism fails to be contained in such symbolic structures due to its semiotic inklings between life and death. It is these inklings that ultimately form a chink in Robert’s seemingly well-ordered and safe containment armor.

Realizing the impossibility of explaining away the true nature of vampirism through science or any of his containment strategies, he becomes a Kristevan subject whose

476

borders of self are put on trial. [Such subjects] begin to lose the ability to discern between inside and outside, self and other, strange and familiar. This phenomenon pushes the reader back to a stage prior to the ability to make judgments about objects, even to judge whether something is an object and not oneself. (McAfee 53)

The loss of his discernment becomes so intense that Neville starts to assert that “the vampire was real. It was only that their true story had never been told” (Matheson 81). He goes so far as to read vampirism into historical events such as the black plague and the fall of Athens, again suggesting a new truth to history. Robert realizes that his liminal subject position cannot give him the right to pass firm and exclusivist “judgments” about the world of the past.

Koenig-Woodyard believes that Robert’s newly formed ambivalence towards the past and the historical origins of this world shows how the semiotic nature of the relationship between science and vampirism—which Koenig-Woodyard believes to be rhizomatic—and ultimately Robert (subject) and the vampires (object) “forms a metaphorical figure eight [like the infinity sign] that adumbrates a kind of epistemological mobius strip; the rhizome [semiotic nature] of vampirism seemingly spirals and loops back on itself, continuously frustrating Neville’s efforts to understand it” (84). When the seemingly subject in control forms such a dynamic relationship with the creatures which he has formerly abjected as the signs of radical otherness, the subject cannot have any defense mechanism against the object. He would be “seized at that fragile spot of subjectivity where [his] collapsed defenses reveal, beneath the appearances of a fortified castle, a flayed skin; neither inside nor outside, the wounding

exterior turning into an abominable interior” (McAfee 53). Robert sees no point in protecting the order of the past world anymore since metaphorically speaking, it is not something which belongs to the inside. By acknowledging that the historical origins of some occurrences in the past can be vampiric, he forgoes the possibility of explaining everything through symbolic structures, and accepts the semiotic nature of our existence; the fact that bespeaks the liminality of his and the vampires’ subject positions, and places both of them as the exterior/interior parts of this “flayed, mobius-strip-like skin” (Koenig-Woodyard 84).

It is in such encounters with violence and liminality that Robert realizes his initial containment and abjection of the vampires and their potential violence constituted his “ultimate coding of [his] crises; of [his] most intimate and most serious apocalypses” (McAfee 50). Putting off the acknowledgement of this instinctive and raw violence is Robert’s way of refusing to see one of his crisis-filled moments. Semiotically speaking, he is more similar to the creatures whom he has abjected in the first place. Like them, he is a liminal figure posed between two worlds; one is dead, but still haunting and erupting into the dead/alive world of his present time.

477

COMMITMENT TO PRACTICE: THE SUBJECT’S ULTIMATE SURVIVAL STRATEGY

After realizing his weak and marginalized position in the world of the vampires, and losing all his material and immaterial possessions, Robert manages to experience the true meaning of alienation of abjection. This experience results in three main outcomes. First, Robert realizes the motile and constructed nature of the subject and abject positions. Having acknowledged the changeable nature of the way in which the normal slips into the abnormal so easily, Neville now attests to the most phobic and ambivalent concept which he has sought to repress for eternity: that it is he who is the abnormal and monstrous legend:

Robert Neville looked out over the new people of the earth. He knew he did not belong to them; he knew that, like the vampires, he was anathema and black terror to be destroyed. And, abruptly, the concept came, amusing to him even in his pain.

A coughing chuckle filled his throat. He turned and leaned against the wall while he swallowed the pills. Full circle. A new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever.

I am legend. (Matheson 170)

By pondering upon the circular (“full circle”) process of the formation of the normal subject, and the superstitious, terrorizing and monstrous abject, Robert experiences true meaning of alienation or what Kristeva believes to be the exile of the subject into abjection. When this exile happens, not only does it make the subject realize the circular and slippery dynamism between subject and abject positions; it also causes the undermining of the “subject’s absolute narcissism and positivity” (Harrington 143). This undermining results in the second outcome of Robert’s alienation/exile, which is his understanding of what he, as the seemingly dominant subject, was not at the beginning—or thought that he was not: a subject in practice. Using the Kristevan point of view, Harrington comments on this practice as follows:

478

Practice is the only manner in which the subject can appear where he is absent. Furthermore, this appearance maintains a curious temporality as an anterior future. In the space of temporal flux, of anticipation, the “contradiction that is the subject” and “that brings about practice” shows the subject as the always absent element in the practice that reveals him. The subject only ever is as process as the crest where meaning emerges only to disappear in a future space that is anticipated and already passed. (144)

At the end of the novel, Robert realizes that acknowledging his marginality and abnormalcy in this post-apocalyptic world is the only way in which he can truly understand how “the new people of earth felt” (Matheson 133). He comes to realize this fact after going through or, in a Kristevan manner, practicing all the contradictions, fluxes and anticipations that have constituted him as the seemingly in control subject. It is this Kristevan reading of the temporary incumbencies of both the subject and abject positions—and their contradictions and fluxes—that can truly attest to the slippery and semiotic nature of survival instinct in the novel’s post-apocalyptic world; the instinct which does not belong to any colonial or colonized entity in the society. This instinct could not see its full-fledged status in either subject or abject positions, but cannot be easily extinguished through abjection and the subject’s phobic misrecognitions.

Apart from the mentioned outcomes, the third outcome of Robert’s alienation and exile is his realization—eventually shared by us as the novel’s readers—that he has never been the controlling subject from the very beginning. Robert’s understanding of “what they felt” (Matheson 160) comes after the categorical “pulverization and musication” of his “primary narcissistic unity” as the subject after becoming truly exiled, alienated and abject (Harrington 143). Cohen comments that, having spent his life generating order through

lists and maps, through the partitions and definitions between humans and the vampires, Neville now embraces disorder:

Disordered, he relinquishes his lists, his partitions, and muddles the distinctions between normal and abnormal, between changeable and unassailable, between death and the birth of a new terror. He envisions his current state as circular, "full circle," a sphere with no clear break. As the vampire becomes the norm and the human becomes the infection, Neville recognizes the violence implicit in his—in all—ordering, acquiesces to the disorder inherent in the plague, and accepts his legend. (Cohen 60)

This disorder makes him realize the futility of his violence, and the fact that it can never negate the presence of the abject entities in this brave new world, no matter how much he tries to contain his environment physically, symbolically, or naturalistically. That is why he states "so long as the end did not come with violence, so long as it did not have to be a butchery before their eyes" (Matheson 170). At the end, he comes to realize that the violence of the various kinds of containment strategies which he used has only amounted to a series of mystical strategies for "mastering the subject: all that exists is the field of practice where, through his expenditure, the subject can be anticipated in an always anterior future; Nothing will have taken place but the place" (Harrington 143). For Robert, this place is the abject and always-threatening place/position of becoming a superstitious legend. At the end, he manages to experience what he was not. He realizes that he has had no distinct agency from the very beginning of his presence in this brave new world. Now at the end, he is the abject and abnormal entity which he thought he was not and would never be. Now, due to the abject and semiotic nature of his legend—which connotes utter disorder, and therefore, cannot be signified, at least holistically—he will always be threatening the normalized and symbolic order of the vampires, and will truly survive. To put it differently, the more one becomes abject, the higher the chances of survival are in the novel's post-apocalyptic world since the abject cannot become totally mapped and contained through the symbolic due to its semiotic nature.

479

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* is the story of the survival efforts of both the controlling subject and the abject. This opinion has a tangential commonality with Matheson's own remark about the novel. He stated: "I don't think the book means anything more than it is: the story of a man trying to survive in a world of vampires" (qtd. in Bowring 142)

After using Kristeva's theoretical formulations, the ambivalence in Robert's phobia towards the vampires as his reaction towards abject entities was justified. In order to suppress this ambivalence, Robert committed his understating of the vampires to a number of degrading, animalistic conceptualizations, or what this study has called misrecognition strategies.

Due to his failure to maintain these strategies and contain the semiotic aspects of the abject vampires, the return of the abject was identified. Through the utilization of Kristevan terminology, the article has shown that this return caused the semiotic eruption of the abject vampires into Robert's symbolic vestiges of contained orders in both the real world and in language.

In accepting his total annihilation⁴ and losing his position as the controlling subject, Neville, though surrendering himself to be remembered through a number of superstitious and monstrous renditions, gained relative permanence and productive agency. Due to the abject subject position of this agency, it would always threaten the new vampire normalcy, as the formerly abnormal and abject vampires threaten Neville.

I Am Legend is a post-apocalyptic story about survival against all adversarial possibilities in the future, some of which would be new and unfathomable right now, and others which would be the direct or indirect continuations of the menacing possibilities of the past and the present.

WORKS CITED

- Bowring, Nicola. "Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*: Colonization and Adaptation." *Adaptation*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2015, pp. 130–44. <https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apv001>
- Cohen, Simchi. "The Legend of Disorder: The Living Dead, Disorder and Autoimmunity in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*." *Horror Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2014, pp. 47–63. https://doi.org/10.1386/host.5.1.47_1
- Diehl, Laura. "American Germ Culture: Richard Matheson, Octavia Butler, and The (Political) Science of Individuality." *Cultural Critique*, vol. 85, 2013, pp. 84–121. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2013.a528575>
- Harrington, Thea. "The Speaking Abject in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*." *Hypatia*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1998, pp. 138–57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1998.tb01355.x>

⁴ Morelock sees *jouissance* in Neville's acceptance of his death. For seeing this reading and whether one could create a connection between *jouissance* and practicing abjection, please refer to Morelock (88).

- Koenig-Woodyard, Chris. "The Mathematics of Monstrosity: Vampire Demography in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 1, 2018, pp. 81–109. <https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.87.1.81>
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia UP, 1982.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Revolution in Poetic Language." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell, 1998, pp. 451–63.
- Matheson, Richard. *I Am Legend*. Tom Doherty, 1954.
- McAfee, Noelle. *Julia Kristeva*. Routledge, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203634349>
- McCabe, Janet L., and Dave Holmes. "Reversing Kristeva's First Instance of Abjection: The Formation of Self Reconsidered." *Nursing Inquiry*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2011, pp. 77–83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1800.2010.00499.x>
- Morelock, Jeremiah. "Abjection and Authoritarianism in *I Am Legend* and Its Remakes." *Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics Number*, no. 74, 2018, pp. 67–88.
- Nuttall, Louise. "Attributing Minds to Vampires in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*." *Language and Literature*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2015, pp. 23–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947014561834>
- Patterson, Kathy Davis. "Echoes of *Dracula*: Racial Politics and the Failure of Segregated Spaces in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*." *Journal of Dracula Studies*, vol. 7, 2005, pp. 19–27.
- Ransom, Amy J. "*I Am Legend*" as *American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations*. McFarland, 2018.

Hossein Mohseni is Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Shahid Beheshti University, Iran, where he also completed his BA, MA and PhD in the same field. His PhD dissertation is entitled "City Spaces in Cyberpunk Fiction." He has published in journals such as *American and British Studies Annual*, *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature Theory and Culture*, *Journal of Literary Studies*, and *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*. His interests include science fiction, literary theory and criticism, modern drama, and the relationship between literature and media.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0509-7959>

h_mohseni@sbu.ac.ir